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ABSTRACT

The study was designed to test the effects of a limited amount of sentence-combining practice on the syntactic development and overall writing ability of foreign students. Participants were freshmen studying English as a second language during an eight-week period. Twenty-four students were divided into a control and an experimental group. The experimental group practiced sentence-combining exercises in addition to the exercises used by the control group. The study tested the following hypotheses: (1) Students in the experimental group would show significantly greater syntactic development than students in the control group. (2) Students in the experimental group would show greater overall writing improvement than students in the control group. The first hypothesis proved valid; the second hypothesis proved to be invalid. In addition to a discussion of the study itself, the report includes a discussion of recent controversies over the use of sentence combining and its adaptation to the foreign student population. (Author/AMH)

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The Effects of Sentence Combining on the Writing of ESL Students at the University Level

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For the past several years, composition instructors have become increasingly disillusioned with the traditional hit or miss approach to the teaching of composition. This method of teaching is based on the assumption that students "learn to write by writing," and focuses on two primary concerns: (1) developing the mechanics of writing, including spelling, punctuation, handwriting and grammar, and(2) creating conditions within the classroom that will stimulate better student writing (Mackintosh and Hill, 1953:49). It would seem that this type of approach is inadequate because it makes no attempt to provide the students with a systematic method for improving the quality of the written

language or the system of rules for generating that language. As a result,

> . . . what improvement comes in the realm of vocabulary or of structure is supposedly fostered through experience or through reading literature or listening to the reading of literature. It is extremely difficult to guide students systematically towards a command of a specified vocabulary or a mastery of sentence types in this manner, however, because it is almost impossible to control the structures or the vocabulary of a literary work of merit; it is also extremely difficult to control the use of vocabulary or structures which arrive in any stimulative experience. Reading and experience do not present vocabulary or the structure of language in a pedagogically well-ordered sequence (Ney, 1975:11-12).

In spite of these inherent deficiencies, many instructors continue traditional methods for the teaching of composition simply because they have no viable alternatives.

With the advent of Chomsky's revolutionary transformational-generative grammar in 1957, linguists, rhetoricians and composition instructors were suddenly provided with a model of language which accounted for the systematic and rule-governed nature of linguistic behavior. The early model of this grammar used double-base transformations, which led into a new development for the teaching of writing, transformational sentence combining, or simply, sentence combining. Although double-base transformations were abandoned by the theorists they provided ". . .systematic programs designed

explicitly to help the student acquire command of an ever increasing inventory of sentence structures (or the rules that enable the student to generate or produce a variety of sentence types)" (Ney, 1975:11-12).

Since its inception (Ney, 1966; Raub, 1966), most research on the effects of sentence combining as measured by improvement in student writing has produced positive results (O'Hare, 1973; Perron, 1974; Miller and Ney, 1967, 1968; Green, 1972; Combs, 1975; Mulder and others, 1978; Vitale and others, 1971; Stedman, 1971; Pedersen, 1977 and Callaghan, 1977). Some research has been directed at American students learning foreign languages. Cooper (1976) experimented with Americans learning German as did Akin (1976) whereas Monroe (1975) experimented with students learning French. To date, however, most of this research has been directed towards native English speakers at the elementary and secondary grade levels. Lately, however, a number of studies have investigated the use of sentence combining with college students. Ney (1976) found no significant changes or even decrements in the writing of college freshmen who practiced sentence combining, leading to the hypothesis that sentence combining is beneficial only to students at a particular age / grade level. This hypothesis was challenged by Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg (1978) whose sentence combining study with college freshmen produced results that contradicted those of Ney (1976) insisting that age / grade level is no deterrent to the utility of sentence combining activities, Daiker et al. (1978) and

also Morenberg, Daiker and Kerek (1978) suggested that Ney's negative findings were due to the small amount of time spent in sentence combining activities.

Like most sentence combining studies, both the Ney and the Daiker-Kerek-Morenberg experiments dealt primarily with native English speakers. This fact, along with the contradictory findings from the two previously mentioned studies, raises the following question: What is the relationship between age/grade, amount of exposure and the native language of the student to the effectiveness of sentence combining practice? To answer this question, a study was designed in the spring of 1978 as a followup of the Ney (1976) study. Specifically, it was designed to investigate the effects of sentence combining practice on ESL students enrolled in a course which serves as the freshman English equivalent for international students.

That such a study would show positive results is not only suggested by the studies already performed teaching French and German to native speakers of English but it is also suggested by Green (1972) who indirectly hinted at the possibility of using sentence combining in ESL when, summarizing McNeill (1970), he noted three facts about child grammar:

> (1) The starting point of grammar is more or less the same for all children. (2) Child grammar is not adult grammar but becomes adult grammar through a process of formulating and modifying linguistic hypotheses and not by imitation alone. (3) A child processes language through a deep structure of his own and will not use surface structure

> that reflects a deep structure that he does not understand (1972:25).

If it is assumed that there is a high degree of correlation in the learning of grammatical sequences by L1 and L2 learners (Krashen, Madden and Bailey (1975), Dulay and Burt (1975), then the potential for using sentence combining activities in ESL becomes obvious. More specifically, Green believed that sentence combining practice could provide the child L2 learners with adult L1 surface structures that would enable them to understand the deep structure better. This type of reasoning would thus provide the theoretical basis for the incorporation of new sentence patterns into written syntax of the child L2 learners (1972:267).

After noting the success of several Tagalog speakers who had performed in his experimental groups, Perron (1974) suggested the possibility of using sentence combining exercises in ESL. Logically assuming that sentence combining practice would be of benefit to native speakers of the various Indo-European languages because their syntactic patterns very closely mirror those of English, Perron was surprised by the fact that native speakers of Japanese, a language in which the syntactic patterns bear very little resemblance to those of English, were able to manipulate the sentence combining drills without any extraordinary difficulties (1974:173).

Like most successful research to date dealing with sentence combining, Perron's experiment was performed using students at the elementary grade level, in this case, the fourth grade. Consequently,

the research gave no indication of whether sentence combining would be effective with older students, and in particular, students of English as a second language. For this reason, the two questions that motivated the present study are: (1) What are the effects of sentence combining practice on foreign students enrolled in freshman composition? (2) If the time limitations and the sentence combining exercises characteristic of Ney's (1976) study are used, will sentence combining practice significantly improve the syntactic skills and overall writing ability of ESL students taking freshman composition?

This latter question becomes particularly important if it is applied to the problem of the competence level of students of a foreign language, including students of English as a second or foreign language. For instance, Menyuk has shown that a learner's competence is reflected in grammatical maturity and that children have the ability to attain the syntactic maturity of older children when provided with more complex models (1969:154). If this is the case, then foreign freshmen, having less syntactic competence than their native English speaking peers, should theoretically have more potential syntactic growth; and hence, their writing ability should be enhanced by sentence combining practice in relatively limited amounts, as in the case of native speaking children. Thus, rather than using age or grade level per se as the gauge indicating when syntactic development is no longer significantly facilitated by sentence combining practice, these researchers will assume that it

is only after the language learner has achieved a particular degree of target language competence that such exercises cease to be beneficial.

From this point, the following experiment was designed to test the effects of a limited amount of sentence combining practice on the syntactic development and overall writing ability of foreign students of freshman English during a comparatively short eight week period. Twenty-four non-native English speakers enrolled in freshman composition at Arizona State University during the spring semester of 1978 were divided into a control and an experimental group. Both males and females participated, their ages ranging from 17 to 28. Due to the limited number of subjects available, all of the students were not ideally matched in pairs. Nevertheless, one student in the experimental group was paired with another student in the control group to the best of the experimenter's ability on the following criteria which constitute a hierarchy of variables ranked in order of listing: native language, pretest T-unit analysis, pretest subjective evaluation, CELT score (structure section), age and sex. (See Appendix I. The term, subjective evaluation, refers to the impressionistic grading of the pretest compositions.) All but three of the pairs shared the same native language, while most of the pairs had similar T-unit analyses, pretest evaluations, and CELT scores. As can be observed from the chart below the test groups were evenly divided with respect to all of the variables listed excepting the pretest subjective

evaluations which favored the experimental group as in Table I.

Group Means of Six Pretest Factors

	Pretest Words Per T-Unit	Pretest Words Per Clause	Pretest Clauses Per T-Unit	Pretest Composition Score	CELT	AGE
Experimental Group	12.18	8.05	1.51	6.22	72.4	21.7
Control Group	12.20	7.47	1.63	4.86	72.8	21.8
Difference	-.02	.56	-.12	1.36	-.4	-.1

The experiment was conducted in a fashion similar to that of Ney (1976), but with the following differences: (1) The Ney experiment involved three groups: (i) a control group, which followed the standard curriculum of a freshman English class, (ii) an experimental group which practiced sentences combining in a fashion similar to that of Miller and Ney (1968) and (iii) an experimental group that practiced decomposition/recomposition exercises patterned after those of Ezor and Lane (1972). In this study, only two groups were used: a control group, which practiced a wide variety of composition skills (free writing, logical development of paragraphs and other rhetorical skills.) The control group did not practice sentence combining, however. The second group, the

experimental group, practiced sentence combining in addition to the exercises used by the control group. These sentence combining exercises were similar to those of the composition and the decomposition / recomposition groups in the Ney experiment. (2) In the Ney study, only the composition group received detailed explanations on how to perform the exercises while the decomposition / recomposition group received no such instruction. In this study, however, in addition to completing the in-class sentence combining exercises, students in the experimental group were also required to complete take-home decomposition / recomposition exercises. Having received explicit instructions as well as practice on the in-class sentence combining exercises, it appeared that the experimental group was able to apply the insights gained from these exercises to the decomposition / recomposition exercises that they performed at home. (3) For a period of eight weeks, the experimental group in the study practiced sentence combining for the first fifteen minutes of each tri-weekly class period, yielding a total of 360 minutes or six hours of actual in-class practice. Although no attempt was made to formally regulate the amount of time spent in performing the take-home decomposition / recomposition exercises, a post-test survey revealed that, on the average, students in the experimental group spent about ten minutes on each of the take-home exercises. Thus the total amount of both in-class and out-of-class exposure to sentence combining activities for the students in the experimental group was approximately ten hours over the eight week period almost

twice that of the experimental groups in the Ney (1976) study. Nevertheless, only 20% of the time that the students spent writing compositions and studying for their freshman composition class was spent on sentence combining exercises so that the experimental aim of determining the effect of "limited doses" of sentence combining was not violated. (4) As in the Ney experiment, aside from the first few minutes of each class period when the experimental group performed sentence combining exercises and the control group did not, all of the subjects received approximately the same classroom instruction. The only difference between the (1976) study and this study in this regard was that the earlier study with American students used a standard reader for American students (Salerno and Myers, Composition and Literary Form) while the current study used a text especially adapted for ESL students (Troyka and Nudelman, Steps in Composition).

So then, the purpose of this study was comparatively modest: to determine whether or not sentence combining practice in limited amounts facilitates the syntactic growth and improves the writing ability of college level ESL students. As such, the study tested the following hypotheses:

(1) Students in the experimental group would show significantly greater syntactic development than students in the control group.

(2) Students in the experimental group would show greater overall writing improvement than students in the control group.

It was assumed that if hypotheses (1) and (2) proved to be correct, the experiment would give credence to the claim that age/grade level (or, more precisely, syntactic competence level) is the major determining factor in the successful utilization of sentence combining activities. In other words, it would seem that native English speakers at the college level may have progressed beyond the stage of syntactic development in which sentence combining activities are beneficial. (Morenberg, Daiker and Kerek have produced evidence which may indicate that even college level ESL students have not yet attained this level of syntactic development, they may benefit from sentence combining activities. If either hypothesis (1) or hypothesis (2) proved false, any one of the following conclusions could be drawn:

(1) Sentence combining practice in small doses does not aid the syntactic development of college level students of ESL.

(2) Time is the major determining factor in the successful implementation of sentence combining practice for college level ESL students and probably also for native speakers of English.

(3) The negative results in an experiment with ESL students could be due to any number of factors cited by Daiker and

and others (1978) in their criticism of the Ney (1976) study. (These factors included lack of enthusiasm on the part of the instructor or negative effects of sentence decomposition exercises.)

Finally, if hypothesis (1) proved true but (2) proved false (i.e. if the experimental students showed significant syntactic development but their overall writing ability regressed), then factors other than syntactic manipulation would have to be considered paramount in the design of an optimal college composition course.

To ascertain the truth or falsity of hypotheses (1) and (2), the students were evaluated on the basis of a pretest and posttest, both of which consisted of 45-minute in-class essays. Before writing the essays, students chose from a list of eight supplied by the instructor. These topics then became the subject of the pretest and posttest essays. These essays were then analyzed according to the three T-unit measures developed by Hunt (1965) and O'Donnell, Griffin and Norris (1967). The results were then tabulated and submitted for statistical analysis.

In reviewing the data, these researchers found it necessary to make certain modifications in the analysis. This was due to the fact that, because the subjects spoke English as their second language, they were much more prone to make low level grammatical errors ranged from omitted articles and incorrect prepositions to the more serious errors involving the omission of essential verbal elements. Because of these errors, the question arose: How un-

grammatical can a sentence be before it is no longer considered a legitimate sentence?

In order to analyze the data in a manner that would most realistically reflect the actual syntactic ability of the students, a class of garbles was established. These were defined as sentences in which the syntactic structures were so distorted that the sentence became unintelligible or so ungrammatical that the strings of words in which they were located were no longer sentences and thereby had to be omitted from analysis. For this reason, garbles were defined in the following manner: first, all grammatical errors were classified as either high-level or low-level errors. Low-level included those errors that, when corrected, did not require additions or alterations to verbal elements and preserved the T-unit count of the original sentence in which the error occurred. For example, in the sentence, The population is big problem today, neither the unnecessary addition of the definite article, the, nor the omission of the indefinite article, a, significantly altered the syntax of the sentence. Besides this, the corrected sentence, Population is a big problem today, would have yielded a work-per-T-unit ratio identical to that of the original--six words per T-unit. Another example of a low level error of this type can be found in the sentence, They put the plate in the table. Here, although the incorrect preposition was used in the sentence, it in no way changes the syntactic structure of the sentence. In both of these cases, then,

the errors are treated as low-level errors, the sentences are considered to be well-formed and are not counted as garbles. Other frequent low-level errors include misplaced adverbs (Even sometimes they judge each other's personality by that), incorrect word order (I realized how between the marrying couples . . .). Because of the structural consistency as well as the invariance between the T-unit counts in the original and revised versions, sentences with low-level errors were included as originally written in the analysis.

In contrast to low-level errors, high-level errors or garbles were designated as those errors which required major syntactic changes, usually to a verb phrase, in order to make them intelligible. One such error can be found in the following sentence:

> Back 30 years ago, when lighter brown skin people, people from Asia were a discriminated group, their skin color was a main factor for discriminating.

To bring this sentence into compliance, the underlined verbal would have to be changed to a noun (discrimination) with a verb of some sort added to it (for example, contributing to, that caused, and etc.). With a change of this nature, the sentence would then read something in the order fo the following:

> Back 30 years ago, when lighter brown skinned people, people from Asia, were a discriminated group, their skin color was a major factor contributing to discrimination.

The major problem encountered in analyzing sentences with high-level

errors was determining how much of the sentence to omit from the analysis. In the above example, aside from a few low-level errors (e.g. brown skin people), over 90% of the above example is grammatically and syntactically sound and could stand as a complete sentence:

> Back 30 years ago, when lighter brown skin people, people from Asia, were a discriminated group, their skin color was a main factor.

Whenever possible, and so long as it did not adversely affect the grammaticality of the sentences in which they occurred, garbled segments, rather than entire sentences, were omitted from the analysis. For example, in the following sentence only the underlined words were omitted from analysis. An acceptable revision would require only the deletion of the underlined material:

> In today's society being a successful woman is very difficult and has to suffer many pressure.

To make the whole sentence acceptable, several different strategies could be used. One such strategy would be to insert a different verb phrase and change the entire structure of the sentence in the following manner:

> In today's society being a successful woman is very difficult and demands that any woman suffer many pressures.

Since such a revision alters the entire structure of the sentence and affects the T-unit analysis of the sentence, the underlined portion of the sentence was considered to be a garble and omitted

from the analysis.

The omission of garbled segments, rather than of whole sentences, was particularly crucial when themes with long sentences, such as the following, were analyzed:

> Then think about his job and his future on job, and see if he could support a good medium class and comfortable family because I don't think no one would like to live on a small house with two children running around climbing the wall and trying to get something to eat and being worried because you can't find anything to give them.

Here again, aside from the underlined segment, the sentence was syntactically sound and free of high-level errors. After the garbled portion was deleted, the T-unit count decreased from 65 words per T-unit to 54 words per T-unit. In this instance, perhaps more significant than the resulting decrease in words per T-unit was the fact that, by deleting only the garbled portion instead of the entire sentence, the sentence was retained as a representative sample of the student's writing ability. If the entire 65-word sentence had been deleted from the corpus as a garble, over 20% of the student's 322 word sample would have been omitted from the final analysis. This analysis followed the procedures of Hunt (1965) and O'Donnell, Griffin and Norris (1967.)

As can be observed from Table I (below), the ratio of clauses per T-unit increased significantly as measured by a regression

analysis (r=0.592 where an r of .5760 is necessary for a significance at the .05 level of probability with 11 degrees of freedom). Although the other scores of the experimental group were encouraging, they were not sufficiently great to attain statistical significance in a regression analysis. Furthermore, none of the control group scores approached statistical significance; in fact the control group students consistently show a decrement in their scores.

Pretest and Posttest Scores on Three Factors of Syntactic Maturity

Factors	Control Group				Experimental Group			
	Pretest	Post Test	Change	r	Pretest	Post Test	Change	r
Words Per T-Unit	12.20	11.76	-.44	.1305	12.18	13.75	1.57	.4124
Words Per Clause	7.47	6.53	-.94	.4243	8.05	8.11	.06	.1598
Clauses Per T-Unit	1.63	1.53	-.10	.0501	1.51	2.69	1.18	.5925*

* Significant at or beyond the .05 level of probability.

With 10 degrees of freedom an r of .5760 is significant at the .05 level.

These scores, although not overwhelmingly in favor of the experimental group, nevertheless are sufficient to accept the first hypothesis as true.

The tenability of the second hypothesis -- that students in the experimental group would show greater overall writing improvement than students in the control group -- was determined by comparing the variance between impressionistic evaluations of the pretests and posttests for both groups. Each theme was rated by three different instructors in the intensive English program at Arizona State University. The three ratings, each based on a one-to-ten scale with ten as the highest score, were averaged together. The evaluations were subjective and reflected the respective instructor's preference and criteria for good writing. An impressionistic method of evaluation was used because it has been shown to yield more valid results than analytic methods (Wiseman, 1949:208). The mean subjective evaluations of the pretests and posttests of the control and experimental groups were calculated and compared to assess the relative changes in the performance of the two groups. A perusal of Table III (below) reveals that, although both test groups showed improvement, the control group showed a greater improvement but from a lower point than the experimental group which started out writing better and continued improving through the experiment.

Pretest and Posttest Scores on Subjective Theme Evaluations

	Pretest	Posttest	Change	T-test
Control Group	4.86	5.87	1.01	3.9850**
Experimental Group	6.22	6.91	.69	2.5520*

* Significant at or beyond the .05 level of confidence.

** Significant at or beyond the .01 level of confidence.

That the experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant improvement on a crucial measure of syntactic maturity, clauses per T-unit, is encouraging and indicates that the first hypothesis is probably valid. Small doses of sentence combining practice will enhance the syntactic growth of ESL students in an English composition class. These findings also support the age/grade/syntactic competence hypothesis while repudiating the implication of Daiker and others that the amount of practice time is the major determining factor in the relative success of sentence combining activities at the college level. In this study, the experimental group showed significant syntactic improvement whereas the control group did not even though the amount of sentence combining practice was quite small.

In light of the fact that the results of this study contradicted those in Ney (1976), the most plausible explanation for the

difference in the results of the two studies is that the subjects in the 1976 study were native speakers of English and, hence, had a higher level of syntactic competence at the outset and did not progress from this level while the subjects in this study had a relatively low level of competence in English and hence progressed quite considerably in their command of English structure as measured by the number of clauses that they wrote per T-unit -- the most important of the measures used. In other words, unlike their native English-speaking peers, the ESL students apparently had not yet reached the plateau of syntactic competence at which sentence combining activities either cease to be of value or require more extensive application to produce measurable results.

The second hypothesis, which dealt with the relationship between sentence combining practice and the development of overall writing ability, proved to be invalid. This finding may have tentatively supported a contention in Ney (1976), where it was pointed out that sentence combining exercises should not be used to the exclusion of other types of activity that are beneficial in the writing class. Students in writing classes should receive instruction in other aspects of writing such as paragraph construction, coherence, diction and the study of models in prose writing. In other words, good writing requires much more than the ability to construct syntactically elaborate sentences. The fact that the control group showed greater improvement in overall writing ability than the experimental group seems to bear this out.

There is, of course, an on-going debate among linguists, rhetoricians, and language teachers as to whether or not sentence combining does increase overall writing ability. Christensen (1968), Moffett (1968) and Cazden (1972), for example, claimed that the type of syntactic manipulation that is encouraged by sentence combining activities would result in convoluted prose typical of that found in bureaucratic communications or technical journals. This claim has been refuted by a number of sentence combining studies. For instance, Ney (1978) argues that sentence combining activities " . . . do not produce whole-sale changes in the linguistic competence of young native speakers, but rather aid them in developing skills for the manipulation of language . . . the linguistic competence of young native speakers is of such a nature that they do not as a rule produce convoluted prose even after practicing extremely complex and rare sentence structures . . ." (1978:2-3). Similar statements on the basis of experimental evidence can be found in the work of O'Hare (1973), Stotsky (1975), and Combs (1975). O'Hare, in reviewing his findings, suggested that the students who received sentence combining practice showed greater overall writing improvement than the students in the control group because they had at their disposal a larger inventory of syntactic alternatives with which to express their ideas. "Perhaps," O'Hare wrote, "knowing <u>how</u> does help to create <u>what</u>" (1973:72). When he discusses the fact that teachers, on a subjective rating of compositions, prefer the writing of students who have been involved in sentence combining

practice, Combs states:

> " . . . as most usually measured, 'quality' of students' writing appears to be significantly affected by SC practice. . . . . Skepticism about SC practice (Christensen, 1968); Moffett, 1968; Cazden 1972, derives from a belief that syntactic manipulation encourages over-complicated, badly conceived prose. Unless one is willing to entertain the counter-intuitive assumption that such prose is consistantly preferred by teacher-raters, the present study shows that students in the experimental group wrote sentences of improved 'quality' (1976:148).

It appears, then, that sentence combining practice facilitates overall writing ability by instilling within students a "kind of automatization of syntactic skill skills" that allows them to devote their attention more towards "greater elaboration of intention and meaning" (Stotsky 1975:55).

Zamel (1976b) has taken the opposite point of view, citing as evidence Mellon's 1969 study in which the experimental group wrote syntactically more complex sentences but qualitatively inferior compositions than did the control group. Distinguishing between sentences of improved quality as opposed to compositions of improved quality, Zamel argued that, although the "manipulation of grammatical forms" (i.e. sentence combining) will facilitate syntactic growth, it should not be "the determining factor in overall writing ability" (1976b:352). This study can hardly be expected

to settle the debate firmly on either side of the issue, but it certainly does not disprove the Zamel contention.

Probably, the whole controversy should be viewed in the light of the old adage that students learn what they are taught. If syntactic manipulation is emphasized in the classroom, students will most likely develop better sentence building skills. If organization and coherency are stressed, students will probably improve in these areas. In this regard, Daiker et al. are correct in their claim that sentence combining exercises enhance the syntactic growth of students as manifested in their writing; that is, it helps them to write stylistically more mature sentence. This also helps the students to write compositions that are preferred by teachers/raters. But it would appear that such a result is not necessarily the outcome as witnessed by the superior scores of the control group on the compositions that they wrote. Thus, from the viewpoint of these researchers, ESL freshman students can benefit from sentence combining activities in small doses. But the sentence combining exercises should not be required of all students to the exclusion of other activities. This suggestion, based on evidence from research reported here, indirectly supports Zamel's contention that ESL students do not need "to be taught any differently than students learning to compose in regular English classes" (1976:71) if such a statement has enough latitude to include sentence eombining exercises which are designed especially for foreign students. The teaching is not different in kind; it simply proceeds from a different base.

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